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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000469

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: POSITIVE BUT CAUTIOUS RESPONSE TO  
OBAMA'S CAIRO SPEECH

REF: ANKARA 799

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4 received a positive response from major political and religious figures as well as much of the press. Many expressed the hope that this speech will mark a new era in U.S. foreign policy towards the Muslim world. The two most noted items from the speech were the President's "Islam is part of America" comment and the statement about the need for an independent Palestinian state. However, there is some skepticism that Obama was simply attempting rhetorically to restore the United State's image and position in the Muslim world without a substantive change in policy. The positive outlook remains, but there is a palpable attitude of "wait-and-see if deeds follow words." End Summary.

#### Response from Political Leaders

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¶2. (SBU) Political leaders, both in the GOAJ and from the opposition, have expressed positive and enthusiastic sentiments about President Obama's Cairo speech. While President Aliyev has yet to make a public statement, others have spoken out. On June 5, Elnur Aslanov, head of the Department of Political Analysis and Information Distribution of the Presidential Administration, was quoted on the pro-government news website, Day.az, as saying, "President Obama's speech in Cairo, addressed to all Muslims, appears to support the hopes for the new administration to build an effective dialog with the Islamic world." Nevertheless, he also highlighted that this was just the beginning of President Obama's work to bring the West and the Muslim world closer together. Also on June 5, Isa Qambar, leader of the Musavat opposition party, was quoted in the Yeni Musavat newspaper as saying, "The U.S. president wants to open a new page in relations between nations. These are good efforts for the whole world and Muslim nations. Therefore, a positive response should be given to Obama's call." Lala Shovkat, an opposition leader from the Azerbaijan Liberal Party stated, "It is a big expression of Obama saying Islam is an integral part of America. The statement on Israel and Palestine as independent countries is also important... Today Obama's peace message is a good sign for the whole world."

#### Response from Religious Leaders

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¶3. (SBU) Allahsukur Pashazada, head of the Board of Muslims of the Caucasus, said in an interview with the Turan news agency on June 5, "We welcome this and wish that all opinions

voiced are put into place." Ilqar Ibrahimoglu, head of the non-governmental Centre for Protection of Freedom of Conscience and Religion was quoted in the newspaper Yeni Musavat as saying, "Sometime ago, the person leading the United States used the phrase 'Islamic fascism' while speaking about the Islamic world. However, now the U.S. president says that Islam is part of U.S. life... The replacement of the phrase 'Islamic fascism' in the U.S. leadership's lexicon with these words is a positive sign."

#### Response from NGO Leader

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¶4. (C) Arzu Abdullayeva, chairwoman of the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly, told the Ambassador June 8 that the President's speech was very well received in Azerbaijan. In her opinion, the standing ovation in Cairo showed that he hit all the right notes in the speech. In addition, Abdullayeva reported that the President's asking King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia for his advice was widely reported in Azerbaijan and was greatly appreciated.

#### Response in Media and Press

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¶5. (SBU) All TV stations carried highlights of the President's speech, though none showed the speech in full. In the press, initial response on June 5 was positive with the daily Azadliq running the headline, "Islam is Part of America," and expressing special interest in this phrase from the President's speech. In the June 7 issue of Yeni Musavat,

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three political analysts discussed their reactions to the President's speech. Vafa Quluzada, a senior analyst and a former diplomat, commented that the atmosphere in the world can change for the better, but only if Obama keeps the promises made in his speech.

¶6. (SBU) Mirmahmud Mirelioglu, a commentator associated with the conservative branch of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, expressed both optimism and pessimism. He said that previously "the door had been closed to the Arab World" for the United States, but Obama has the ability to open it. However, he doubts if this will occur citing the immediate lack of a policy change following Obama's trip to Turkey. He also stated that economic and security issues will remain the two most important issues for the United States, with democracy and human rights in the third and fourth positions.

Restoring the United States image and position, lost during the previous administration, appears to be the real motivation in his opinion, he said. Likewise, Ilqar Mammadov, an expert on Iran stated that, despite the speech addressed to Muslims, tensions between the United States and Iran were too great to be changed any time soon. Government-leaning 525 Newspaper highlighted the numerous Koran citations, but misunderstood the President's reference to Rep. Keith Ellison, who was sworn into office with a Koran. 525 mistakenly reported that President Obama himself took the oath of office on the Koran.

#### Embassy Follow-up

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¶7. (SBU) On June 7, an interview with Ambassador Derse was aired on the leading Sunday night news show, ANS Television's Hesabat, in which she commented on the President's Cairo speech. The Ambassador emphasized that President Obama came to office with a firm commitment to establish a new beginning with Muslims all over the world, based on engagement, listening, and working together with all international partners in the spirit of mutual respect and mutual interests. On June 4, PAO Terry Davidson went on Khazar TV (Turkish/religious leanings), an hour after the speech for an interview. He also appeared on public television's Sunday news review program. Embassy Baku also translated overnight

the full text into Azerbaijani for distribution to press and contacts on June 5.

¶8. (C) Comment: Comments on the President's speech in secular, majority-Shia Muslim Azerbaijan largely reflected observations voiced elsewhere in the Muslim world. That is, the President's speech was widely applauded as a historic step. Like others, Azerbaijan is now looking for the deeds to follow the President's well-received words.  
DERSE